

Sermon for Sunday, February 27, 2011
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Confession: Brokenness and Grace in God's Songs
Psalm 32:1-5, 51:1-17

The need for confession

I yelled at my children one day right before Christmas in 1988. My daughters, six and four years old, were crawling and sliding on their bellies under the Christmas tree. They were getting their clothes dirty, essentially mopping our wooden floor with their sweaters. If they had stood up, they would have knocked the tree over and broken some decorations. They really did need to stop what they were doing and they did not stop when I first asked them to do so. But my lecture on their irresponsible behavior became a rant. I *permitted* their behavior to irritate, exasperate, even infuriate me. Exasperation surged toward wrath. I felt it coming, but I didn't count to twenty-four or step away and take a deep breath. I burst into emotional flames and did not reach for the fire extinguisher.

Why did I let mild disobedience and childish misdemeanors incite me? I was tired. We had an infant, three weeks old, crying and keeping us awake. And there was pressure at college, where, as the semester ended, I had to grade finals and papers for 400 college students. But there was no justification, no warrant, for my wrath. Why did I yield to the temptation to vent my childish rage on children I so dearly love? What good did it bring me? It answered no need, brought no pleasure.

As Augustine said, "I had no motive for my wickedness except wickedness itself."¹ Augustine rightly says that sin is absurd, groundless, and unreasonable. Yet the irrationality of sin does not excuse us from the task of examining and confessing sin. When we confess, we recognize, own, lament, and hate our sin. We must understand our sin, if not perfectly, then at least well enough to repent of it.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 87, says, "Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience."

To repent, we need to understand the roots of our sin. Most people respond to misbehavior, disrespect, and injustice fairly well at first. For the first blow or two, we stay calm and patient, detached enough to ask, "What is going on here?" But most of us reach a tipping point. We become irritated, even explosive. Or we withdraw, resentful and sullen.

But this was worse than ordinary lack of self-control. My father shouted insults at me daily, lecture bombs blowing up in my hands and face for years, and I had vowed never ever to do anything like that to my children. But he had *modeled* it, and I saw with frightening clarity, *I knew how to do it too*. How I had hated his degrading lectures. What I did wasn't the *same*, but something at the core felt too similar. I felt like a sinner and a failure.

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, Chadwick, 29.

Ashamed, I apologized profusely. Later that day, I asked their forgiveness. Years later, I remembered the moment and apologized again. Blessedly, my children didn't recall. But I still feel revulsion at that act and similar times when my actions, my words represent the worst of who I am and never want to be.

That's my story. Your story is different, but not by all that much. The apostle Paul spoke for everyone in Romans 7:14-21 – even believers, even saints, pastors and prophets, and every other person that you think is main-lining grace and Jesus: “I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out... No, the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing... When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.” So we need to confess.

1. The place of confession in the Psalms

We've seen that the lament is the most common type of psalm. As we read them, we see that most of them lament the wrongs done to the writer. The world is chaotic, disorderly and the psalmist is suffering that disorder: betrayal, irrational hate and mockery; poverty, thirst, sickness, prison, loneliness and depression. But think: if all sorts of people are *suffering* evil, someone has to be *inflicting* evil and that someone might be you and me. So we need psalms of penitence.

Psalms of penitence explore disorder within, our struggle with our sin, our guilt, the chaos we bring on ourselves and on others.

If it's right to lament the sins of others and the losses we endure as a result, then it's right to lament our sins. This is more than a matter of proportion: If we lament other sins, we must mourn, repent, and confess our own sins. In psalms of lament, something is wrong in the outside world. Penitential psalms confess that the fault lies within, with the singer (Ps. 6, 32, 38, 51, 130, 143 – cf. Matt. 5.)

In confessional psalms, the singer knows he has sinned against God. He wants to confess sin and gain liberty from its burden.

O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger / or discipline me in your wrath...
 My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.
 My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly (Ps. 38:1-5).

Confessional psalms can shift from agony to confidence in God's mercy:

If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?
 But with you there is forgiveness... O Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
 for with the LORD is unfailing love / and with him is full redemption (130:3-7).

2. The nature of confession: Psalm 51

Psalm 51 is the crown of the penitential psalms. David is in agony. His sin torments him, he confesses it and pleads for the mercy. The root of the Psalm lies in David's sin with Bathsheba. In brief:

A beautiful woman named Bathsheba tempted David by bathing in his sight. He did not turn away or resist, but took her, conceived a child with her, and orchestrated a cover up. Bathsheba's husband was a warrior. He finally gave orders that led to his death in battle.

David's sin was public and irreversible (death). He acted deliberately and callously, to the harm of many, even though he knew better. A year later, God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David.

He told the king, "You are the man."
David replied, "I have sinned against the Lord."

At that moment, David made no excuses. He didn't say, "She entrapped me." He didn't say, "Other kings take whatever they want" - although it's true that they do. He never blames, never excuses. He simply confesses. And God simply forgives. For no sin lies outside the perimeter of grace. Psalm 51 describes David's condition in the darkest hour. The strongest request receives the richest grace. The prophet told David, "The Lord has taken away your sin." Psalm 51 says it was written at this time, just after Nathan confronted David for his sin.

The Plea for mercy (51:1-3)

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

This is a straight plea for grace. David begs God to show *mercy, covenant love or compassion* (51:1). The appeal to love is essential - we will never come to God with our failures unless we believe He loves us. We must know He wants to restore, not to condemn.² David asks the Lord to act in three ways: to *blot out transgressions* (51:1), to *wash away iniquity* and to *cleanse sin*.

“Wash away” means to erase, wipe off a sin. This is the definitive, once for all act of putting away sin and guilt. The idea is atonement and justification.

“Cleanse” is a term for laundering dirty garments. This is the process of removing spiritual and moral contamination – sins and character flaws. David knows he is unfit to stand before God or man. He needs to clean up internal - sanctification.

David's sin ruined everything. He appeals to God's covenant love, so he may start afresh. David may have temple sacrifices in mind. The sacrifices were real and important means of grace at that time. But David's language is personal; he comes to God with empty hands. He dare not even call God by intimate names. He says, "O God" and appeals to God's compassion.

The Confession 51:4-6: "Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak, and justified when you judge."

This is the moment of confession. David owns and admits his sin. It is all too visible to him; it is "always before me." He can't stop thinking about it. He asks God to blot it out, wash it away, cleanse it, and purify him – he asks seven times in all.

² Futato, Ps, 184

It reminds us of the prodigal, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." The prodigal certainly sinned against his family by wasting his inheritance, yet he knows the essential sin is against God. This is a beautiful paradox. He is unworthy to call God Father, yet he just said, "*Father* I have sinned." What else can he say? Where else can we go? With David we say, "I am unworthy to call on you, yet we do call on you."

David watches himself, as psalmists often do, but God is the ultimate audience. David doesn't deny that he wronged people. But he insists that he offended God above all. This is always true, but especially for David, who was God's leader. He had power, by his example, to lead many to holiness or sin. Leaders always do: Whether you are a school teacher, a parent, or a CEO. Your good deeds and your sins count a bit more. Sorry to burden you, but it's true.

David confesses something else: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (51:5). His sin is neither accident nor aberration. Maybe David's several wives were giving him grief when he saw Bathsheba. Maybe he had just received a letter from a fellow king boasting about wife number seventeen. Maybe he suffered a moment of weakness. Immaterial!

David says, "This coheres with my nature. I'm a sinful man, from sinful stock." That's no excuse, it's the culmination of his confession. He owns his actions, calling them "my sin." He says they are inexcusable, yet typical, pervasive and ongoing. This is the sustained tone of Psalm 51. David never stops confessing.

Apply: If you intend to confess a sin, examine yourself honestly. Don't confess and add excuses. If you petition for grace, don't confuse things by suggesting you need sympathy too. Ask for grace, and hope for restoration.

Some particulars: Confession has to be genuine, which includes an element of ripeness. That is, take time to examine yourself, your actions, to determine, before God, if you sinned or not. Take time to prepare for a true confession, rather than a dirty confession. Dirty confessions come in several forms:

- Hasty confession: Yes, yes, I sinned. Sorry! Now let's move on...
- Godless confession: I'm sorry this happened. Remorse – I got caught, I am embarrassed, have to face consequences. Not "I" have sinned vs. "You." Remorse is: I did something bad, now I'll be good. Repentance is: I offended God. We go not from bad to good, but from bad to God.
- Confession with excuses: Yes I sinned, but I was provoked. Question: Who was there every time you sinned?

Why do we hate to confess? Self-concept is often a big issue. We think of ourselves as "a good person" – a good husband, wife, father, mother, friend, neighbor, boss, or co-worker. When we do something bad, which clashes with that image, we may 1) deny it or 2) blame it on others.

Deny that it happened: "I wasn't shouting, I was debating energetically; I'm not greedy, I only want what I deserve."

Blame it on others. "It must be their fault. Since I'm a good person, if I do something wrong, it has to be someone else's provocation."

Hope for restoration lies with God (51:7-9)

Hear David's plea: "Cleanse me... wash me... create in me a pure heart" (51:7-10). David needs forgiveness, but he also needs transformation. We often "pray that God would change *other people*," but David prays, "*Change me.*" Create something new in me. Reform the materials and make it something new. May God restore us to truth, wisdom and joy. He asks God to do everything: To purge and wash him, to hide and blot out sin; to create a new heart, to restore, uphold, deliver him. We must ask God to change us.³

Renewal of heart (51:10-13)

David prays for personal renewal: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (51:10). Saul sinned and God cast him out, withdrew his Spirit. "Not me, Lord," David pleads. He prays that God's spirit would renew his spirit, and make it steadfast – changed and then unchanging. He wants to persevere. He knows that we persevere by grace as surely as we are justified by grace. If he perseveres, he can lead once again. "Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you" (51:13).

Humility in worship (51:14-17)

The result is humble and sincere worship. When David says "You do not delight in sacrifice" (51:16) he means sacrifice offered as ritual. What counts most is "a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." When restoration is complete, he hopes to lead others in praise (51:15). He will teach God's way and restore other sinners (51:13, 18-19).

3. The result of confession: Psalm 32

Psalm 32 is a paradox: The theme is sin, but the tone is joyful. David begins, "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven" and ends. "Rejoice in the Lord and be glad." Once again the psalms surprise us. They place lamentation and praise side by side one moment. Next they join confession of sin and joy. How does that happen? What does it teach us?

In Psalm 32, David has confessed his sin and experiences the blessed release that follows repentance. Sin confessed brings forgiveness, guilt removed, and peace restored. The alternative, David says, is misery. For when he kept his sin hidden, it devoured his bones and sapped his strength. Then he confessed his sin. God forgave and relieved him (32:3-5). So he counsels everyone to seek God, to give up their stubborn ways and enjoy God's covenantal love (32:6-11). In detail...

The blessing of forgiveness

The Psalm doesn't begin, "Blessed are *the righteous, the sinless.*" It *assumes* that humans sin and blesses those "whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered" (32.1). The psalm uses three terms for sin:⁴

³ Bruegg, 100

⁴ Craigie, Psalms, 266

- Transgression means rebellion vs. God's law.
- Sin is a general term for any offense or turn from the right path.
- Sin the second time is "iniquity" (distortion, criminality, disrespect for God's will).
- So the Psalm assumes that sin is real, not a feeling of guilt, but a reality that afflicts humans in themselves and in their relations with God and others.

He repeats, "Blessed is the man whose iniquity the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit" (32:2). "No deceit" means we own our sins. We aren't trying to deceive God or ourselves. Repentance and confession must be genuine if we want forgiveness.

Beside his three terms for sin, David has three terms, metaphors for *atonement*. First, sins are "lifted" or "removed" from sight. Second, sins are "covered" or concealed, so God no longer sees them. This is not a cover-up, however. For third, God chooses not to account, reckon or impute sin to us (Romans 4).

This is a judicial act. Sins don't simply disappear, they are covered by the blood of sacrifices in the Old Testament, and ultimately, truly covered by the blood of Christ. These terms – transgressions are lifted, sins are covered, iniquity not counted – together declare that forgiveness is comprehensive, complete for all who repent.

David didn't see that right away. For a long time, he tried to keep silent. He didn't admit his sin to God, his friends, or even to himself. Have you ever hidden sin from yourself? Perhaps you are afraid of the consequences of honesty. Perhaps you are a verbal or physical bully, perhaps you manipulate people. Maybe you are greedy. But the truth clashes with your carefully constructed self-image.

Perhaps you are afraid of the consequences of your sin. If it's public, you will lose your job, your reputation. You fear God's wrath – as if he doesn't know. But you don't want to admit that he knows. That's why David tried to hide his sin. The results were devastating:

Physical distress: His bones wasted away. Guilt can bring physical problems: David became listless, sleepless, and bones painful. The body pays when the soul strays.

Emotional distress: He groaned "all day long." His strength was gone. When we hurt others, we groan within, becoming grumpy, accusing, agitated.

Then, David says "I acknowledged my sin... and you forgave the guilt of my sin (Ps. 32:5). God exists. We're in relationship with him and accountable to him. Sin causes problems, as surely as bad posture or alcoholism. Sin without repentance destroys things. I must ask: "Have you repented?" Do you grasp the issue?

When you drop someone's dish and it breaks, you say "I'm sorry" but it's not a sin and you shouldn't say "forgive me." Sorry is for accidents, not sins.

If you fire off an ill-informed email at 3 a.m., you acted foolishly, and you should apologize. When you tell a joke that stings someone in your audience, that's foolish too. A heartfelt apology is in order.

But sin is more than a careless act, a hasty or foolish act. Sin is not a slip, it's a moral violation that harms both God and man. Whether it's ignorant and unknowing, or premeditated and malicious. Sin requires the words, "Forgive me."

Sometimes we sin without knowing it. We sincerely deny it at first. But the more we think, the more we see we have done wrong. I return to Psalm 69. It begins with a pitiable lament: "The water is up to my neck... my enemies hate me without reason." But then, "You know my folly, O God." Psalms 7 also laments, then says, "I may be guilty too. Maybe I brought some of this on myself" (7:3-4).

The prime cure for sin is repentance. To God first, then to the people we have wronged. It has to be sincere. Not quick, perfunctory: "OK, OK, get off my back. Let's move on. I'll say the words."

Alan Jacobs distinguishes between *wanderers and wayfarers*. In Scripture, a wanderer is lost, directionless. Cast out, without sure food or water, they stagger from place to place. Wanderers have lost their way and have lost the Way, God's way. Wayfarers can look like wanderers at first. Their life is confused, scattered. But wayfarers are going somewhere. They have a goal and are bound to get there.

When we sin, wanderers and wayfarers look about the same at first. But the wanderer does not repent, doesn't seek God for grace or direction. The wayfarer knows he has strayed from the Way (Acts 9:2, 19:9, 23; 24:14). But wayfarers know to return. Someone brings them back (James 5:19). A friend, a prompting from the Lord – a voice that says, "Come on, you know better." He says, "Don't be like the mule, which 'will not come' to its master" (cf. 32:10).

This is the point of Psalm 32:6: "Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found." There is a time to "find God" again. A day of grace and we must take hold of it. Then, even though "the mighty waters rise, they surely will not reach him" (32:6b). God is "my hiding place" my protection and deliverance (32:7). God's "unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him" (32:10).

We need to confess

Scotty Smith wrote a confession about the sin of irritation over the wrong things: Father, forgive us when traffic delays bother us more than human trafficking. Forgive us when we show more irritation towards our children than vexation about starving children in the world. Forgive us when we get more offended by a personal slight than grieved when your name is taken in vain...

Forgive us when we waste our anger on pettiness, revenge, and holding grudges, rather than investing our passion in... justice, mercy and advocacy. Forgive us when we fuel our critical spirit by rehearsing the sins of others, even though we know you will never again remember our sins....

Forgive us when we get more disgusted with our spouse's imperfections than humbled by our own. Forgive us when we are more vexed about what our friends and family members haven't done for us, than we are astonished and grateful for everything you have done for us. Forgive us when we get angry over our foiled plans, even though we know you plan our future perfectly.

Real confession goes deep. It probes the sins we are prone to commit. What sins did my parents, friends model for me, so I know how to commit them. What sins does my history make it easy for me to commit?

Did you grow up in a rough neighborhood with some kind of bully? You may be quick to defend yourself, slow to trust, prone to keep others at a distance. You may scorn authority. You may be full of bluster, quick to criticize or fight, a cynic.

Do you come from privilege? You may love false gods of comfort, privilege, status, achievement more than you know. You may expect the world to be your servant. Or you may rebel against all that and live to relax, so determined to fight off an alien script that you refuse every script and wander aimlessly through life.

Was your family wonderful? Dreadful? Either way, you can make family into an idol, to prove we can do just as well. Or we may let past traumas fill us with fear so we run.

What image do you have for yourself? What do you want to project to the world and why? Do you know that you will deny many sins, if they challenge that image? So let's search and repent and receive the blessing: "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered." Seek God while He may be found, and enjoy His deliverance.